

Persuasion: An Autumnal Tale

Persuasion is Jane Austen's last published work and her only novel to be published incomplete; although it was immediately followed by revisions. It is also the only novel with two alternate chapters for the end that people have access to, both the final printed edition and Jane Austen's original manuscript. *Persuasion* was published posthumously in December of 1817, (but dated as published in 1818) the year of Jane Austen's death, with *Northanger Abbey*. It sold well, as all of her novels had. However, *Persuasion* differs from all of Jane Austen's other novels in the fact that the book begins in the middle of the story.

The novel opens in the fall of 1814, but the story of Anne Elliot truly began earlier, in the year 1806. As *Persuasion* opens, we see that Anne Elliot's father, Sir Walter Elliot, is letting his house to Admiral Croft and his wife, and preparing to move to Bath. Admiral Croft's wife is the sister of Frederick Wentworth, a captain in the royal navy and the man that Anne had fallen in love with in the summer of 1806. When Captain Wentworth comes to visit his sister and stays for quite some time, a reunion between Anne and him is inevitable. Anne knows that she is still in love with Captain Wentworth, but it remains to be seen whether or not he is still in love with her. She was the one that broke off their engagement all those years ago and he could not, and for most of the novel still cannot, understand why. Many years have passed since they first met and fell in love and to a large degree they are both different people now than they used to be. *Persuasion* explores the idea of first love and whether or not two people who have such a sad and painful history can be willing to give it another try and open their heart to love once more.

Persuasion is Jane Austen's only novel that takes place within a very specific time frame (1814-1815) and it involves an older heroine than any of her other novels do. (Anne Elliot is 27, whereas Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are 20 or 21.) Such specificity on the part of Jane Austen has led many scholars to wonder if *Persuasion* is, more so than any of her other novels, a re-telling of her own story, and events within her life (Bloom 5). Another large focus within *Persuasion* is the idea of social classes. Sir Walter Elliot and two of his daughters, Elizabeth and Mary, are obsessed with title and rank, and even the more intelligent and discerning family friend Lady Russell "had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them" (Austen 11).

Throughout the entire novel characters of differing ranks and classes are introduced, and many of those characters of rank turn out to be either scheming and treacherous or entirely useless and stupid: Lady Dalrymple, Sir Walter Elliot, and William Elliot just to name a few. Austen sets these people up in direct contrast with naval officers – people like Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft – and plain, ordinary people, i.e Mrs. Smith, who may have started out as 'nobodies' in the world but through hard work and tenacity have risen up in the ranks. They are not titled and many would not acknowledge them as gentlemen and women, but their worth is of a far more valuable and superior kind. Anne's own gentle temper and kind manner make her, "of high merit but low value in her world, while the world sees her relatives such as Sir Walter and her sister Elizabeth as being of high social value and low merit" (Weisser 19).

Persuasion is different from Austen's usual novels in the way that it handles the outcomes of social class relationships as well. In *Emma*, Austen creates very distinct lines between social classes and the associations that they each possess and makes several excellent points about the distinction between classes and whether or not those distinctions should exist; but in the end everyone marries within their own 'level'. *Persuasion* takes an entirely different path and, "the bond that is developed between personalities outranks the bond that holds social levels apart" (Wiltshire 169).

However, the clearest and most prevalent theme within Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is its characteristics as an autumnal tale; a tale of second chances and the deep and abiding happiness that they can bring. Book critic Caryn James writes that, "*Persuasion* stands in Jane Austen's career as *The Winter's Tale* does in Shakespeare's: it is a lyrical, autumnal story of lost love, with the unexpected reward of a happy ending" (2). Austen sets *Persuasion* differently than she sets every other novel. All other heroines in Austen's novels are discovering love for the first time; their stories are just barely beginning, while Anne Elliot's seems to be over when the novel starts. "The dominant mood [of the novel] is autumnal, nostalgic, a sense of the most significant period of experience being in the past, recollectable but irretrievable and unrepeatable" (Tanner 112).

Where, in a normal Austen novel, the reader starts out curious and full of excitement for what will happen to the heroine of the story, the reader of *Persuasion* starts out very worried for Anne. She is clearly most unhappy. "Anne had been too little from home, too little seen. Her spirits were not high" (Austen 14). However, before readers can get too concerned and begin to

feel as though there is no possible chance for happiness in this novel, Austen alleviates some concerns by throwing in a possible hope for romance, “She [Anne] had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning” (29) while simultaneously alerting them to the fact that this novel is a work in progress, but one that moves backwards, from end to beginning.

When Captain Wentworth waltzes back into Anne Elliot’s life, he finds her to be, “so altered that he should not have known [her] again” (Austen 58). Her bloom, her vitality, her life – once so fresh, pretty, and captivating – has been lost. A large portion of that must be due to the past and the fact that “her attachments and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect” (Austen 27). And yet, it is not to be autumn in Anne Elliot’s life for forever. As the seasons in the novel change, so too does the countenance of Anne Elliot.

As the autumn season winds its way through the novel, a second chance begins to wind its way through Anne Elliot’s heart. This second chance is part of what creates the autumnal magic that permeates *Persuasion*. “*Persuasion* satisfies that dream of a ‘second chance’ which must appeal to anyone who has experienced the sense of an irreparably ruined life owing to an irrevocably, mistaken decision” (Tanner 110). Austen begins to give us subtle hints of the ending of autumn in Anne’s life when Anne is out on a walk on a fine November afternoon admiring “the tawny leaves and withered hedges...repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn” (Austen 80). Yet, as Anne is walking, thinking, and breathing in autumnal thoughts she passes a farmer, and the farmer is “at work plowing a

fresh path, counteracting the autumnal quotations because he means to have spring again” (Tave, 17). Anne is about to be given a shot at a second life. The path may be rocky, it may be painful, and it may not work out; but it will be given nonetheless.

As *Persuasion* progresses it changes from a tale of lost love to a tale of “romantic renewal.” Austen draws from her own personal life and “reverses her usual narrative association of youth with romance and feeling and age with reason and wisdom” (Weisser, 30). The opening scenes of loss (personal loss and economic loss) begin to reverse their trajectory and work in an opposite direction. There is nothing lost that does not end up found, and found to be better, richer, and more worth having. Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth go through loss, both separately and together, but it makes their end success that much more delightful.

The novel ends with the return of spring. Spring to the town of Bath and the countryside of Kellynch Hall. Spring to Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot. Spring to Anne’s countenance. A. Walton Litz captures it best when he says, “If asked to summarize Jane Austen’s last three novels in three phrases, one might say that *Mansfield Park* is about the loss and return of principles, *Emma* about the loss and return of reason, and *Persuasion* about the loss and return of ‘bloom’” (37). Time can do many things. It can hurt and it can heal, and in *Persuasion* time is undoubtedly healing. Time is leading to the oblivion of the past and a heightened consciousness of the future.

There are very few people on this Earth today who do not regret any moment of their lives. Most, if not all, humans wish that they had done, or not done, something. Said, or left unsaid, something. Everyone wishes for a second chance at least once. And that wish, that

knowledge that something that happened in life did not happen perfectly the first time around, is what draws so many people to *Persuasion*.

That wish is also why studying *Persuasion* – not merely reading, but deeply looking into and analyzing *Persuasion* – is something that would be beneficial to everyone. So much of the novel is spent “watching unacknowledged worth in the process of being discovered, the neglected cared for, the invisible made visible” (Weisser 34) that *Persuasion* becomes impossible to read without applying some of these principles to life. After reading *Persuasion*, there is a higher inclination in the heart of the reader to find the worth in the world; to find the good. An inclination to look back into the past, to look back at where the second chances that were so ardently desired did not emerge, but no longer with regret. Rather now, to look with new eyes that can more clearly see what all of the many experiences in life have been for. To see what has been learned, what has been gained from all of the mistakes made or all of the harsh words said. To look and to see with eyes that can now more accurately judge if perhaps a second attempt should be made, or if the past should simply be let go.

Persuasion teaches “involvement with other people” and “implies the power to change.” (Morgan 82) Jane Austen brings to light an amazing insight and wisdom that can be gleaned from this novel. Rather than bringing the reader’s focus solely to the mind of the public and the social changes that need to be brought about in the world (as she has done in novels past), she also brings the reader to look at the deep and private truths of his or her own heart.

Arguably the most important of the truths of the heart that *Persuasion* brings out is the fact that some things are better the second time around. Weisser states that, “As the novel

brings the lovers together in its final chapters, their reunion is said to be better than the first love." (35) Why? Why is their final, second ending better than the ending they could have had all those years previously? Because, they were now "more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment" (Austen 227). In life many things do not work out the first time around, and many more things do not work out at all. But people should never be afraid of second chances. They are something to be leapt at, something to be joyfully seized. A second chance brings with it "understanding, realism and mutuality" (Weisser 35) and a happiness that goes deeper and runs truer than a first chance ever could.

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